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Viewpoint

A comment on 'What is this thing called CST?' (Midgley, 1996) ¹

Martin Reynolds (2002)

In 1996 Gerald Midgley¹ summarised concerns expressed over Jürgen Habermas's *knowledge constitutive interest* (KCI) theory.² KCI postulates that knowledge is tied to three underlying human interest categories: (i) towards *technical* control, (ii) *practical* interaction and (iii) *emancipatory* ideals. Midgley challenges KCI in the first four points of a six-point challenge to the assumptions underlying earlier ideas informing 'critical systems thinking' (CST), and in particular the version of CST encapsulated in 'total systems intervention' (TSI) authored by Flood and Jackson.³ Given how this critique of Habermas's earlier work has been so influential in steering subsequent debate on CST, methodological pluralism and systemic intervention, it is surprising that, to my knowledge, these points of challenge have not come under any explicit scrutiny. The first and most pervasive point challenges the tendency towards *universalisation* underlying KCI theory. In TSI, Habermas's theory is proposed as a *metaparadigm*, coordinating the use of other paradigms. Midgley argues that KCI itself, like any theory, is an embodiment of its own assumptions and can therefore not be assigned universal privilege but should be treated rather in terms of being a *separate* paradigm. The second point challenges the technocratic presupposition of the first constitutive interest category which suggests that human/nature relationships can only be understood in technical terms of an interest towards prediction and control. Would it not be preferable, Midgley argues, "to talk in terms of human beings having an interest in building and preserving a sustainable, interactive relationship with their non-human environment"? (p.15). A closely related third point addresses the second constitutive category in challenging the anthropocentric bias: "In my view, talking about a commitment to human emancipation, rather than a more general commitment to "improvement" (and "sustainable improvement" in particular), does nothing to encourage people to challenge the automatic prioritization of a human boundary in systems practice" (p.16). Midgley's fourth point draws attention to the third constitutive category and alerts us

to the problem of associating human progress with a consensual ideal of human emancipation. The evolutionary tone of social development subscribed by Habermas, it is argued, neglects the fact that some peoples' improvement can often be other peoples' setbacks. The implied claim is that Habermas is too idealistic. Moreover, his idealism is associated with a eurocentric bias in privileging a Western/European model of social development.

These points have to some extent been merely reified through frequent assertions amongst systems practitioners that Habermas himself no longer finds his earlier work defensible.^{4,5,6,7} Such authors then prefer to position themselves more to what is considered Habermas's second on-going phase of philosophical work concentrating on universal pragmatics and the pursuit of the 'ideal speech situation' in developing a theory of *communicative action*.⁸ Five charges against KCI can then be summarised: (i) that Habermas himself no longer finds KCI defensible; and (ii) that there is an overriding and untenable *universalism*, incorporating aspects of (iii) *technocentrism*, (iv) *anthropocentrism*, and (v) *idealism*. I shall address each charge in turn.

(i) Habermas's "non-defence" of KCI: The assertion here gives a misleading impression of Habermas actively rejecting the significance of his earlier work. Whilst Habermas acknowledges the need for a revision of the concepts used, he has nevertheless made clear his underlying support for KCI, as expressed, for example, during an interview in 1985:⁹ "I still consider the outline of the argument developed in the book to be correct" (p.78). It is important to remember that the theory of knowledge-constitutive interests was driven by the need for, and remains one of the most robust expositions of, an epistemological critique against positivism. In a later postscript to KCI, Habermas defends his shift of emphasis:¹⁰ "My point is that in the last few years the framework of discussion has changed in a way which makes criticism less urgent. What is now needed is the construction of a theory of communicative action" (p.354). Habermas's subsequent work on developing a communication theory is better understood as the next stage on from this critique in a wider unfolding process, rather than as a denial of earlier work. As Honneth¹¹ suggests, "the communicative action theory leaves behind the framework in which it had been originally grounded as an anthropology of knowledge" (p.281). The subsequent focus on communicative action is associated with a concern for the *practical* constitutive interest category, from which the possibilities of a more constructive social *emancipatory* development

might be sought. The purpose, as Habermas in 1985 saw it, is to help shift from a paradigm of social development associated with production (carrying an implicit positivist ideology) to one associated with communication (with an explicit critical idealist ideology). Far from working against earlier ideas on KCI, Habermas would appear more to be consolidating the explanatory base of the theory in attempting to theorise and develop more concisely the potential of the practical constitutive interest. Let us turn our attention though to each of the specific charges presented by Midgley.

(ii) Problem 1: universalism: The point here reflects a wider debate amongst systems practitioners on the theoretical persuasiveness of 'social constructivism' and 'critical realism'. In refining a critical realist perspective to challenge the dichotomous ideological divide between constructivism and realism, Peter Dickens¹² makes the observation "... It is a moot point whether it is worthwhile building and maintaining a large scale academic industry around the obvious fact that understandings and their communication are social constructs" (p.83), and then usefully goes on to make the distinction between "strong" and "weak" social constructs. Social Darwinism, for example, as exemplified by the work of Edward Wilson, is characterised as constituting a *strong* social construct, consisting of ideas that are highly contestable. Darwin's original biological theory, on the other hand, is characterised as being a relatively *weak* social construct through having a central core of robust explicators which, whilst being subject to revision, have stood the test of time in the field of biology providing the foundations for modern genetics. Dickens suggests that "acknowledging that knowledge is socially constituted does not entail that knowledge is *only* socially constituted" (p.72 original italics). In other words, whilst any theory, being a social construct, is inevitably and properly revisable, there is a realist constituent (real material relations and processes) reflective of real causal powers.

I would argue that the categories of KCI might similarly be described as 'weak' social constructs; socially constituted, certainly, as Habermas² himself acknowledges, they "express anthropocentrically deep-seated interests which direct our knowledge and which have a *quasi-transcendental* status" (p.194; my italics), but nevertheless retaining powerful and persuasive real-world currency. In systems literature, John Mingers¹³, whilst warning against confusion between the 'maps' of the territory with the actual 'territory', goes on to make the significant point that "maps do still guide us through the territory, and there are better and worse maps" (p.177). Drawing on the same critical realist tradition as Dickens,

Mingers suggests that we do not have to accept theories as being *equally* valid. Later, in a critique of TSI and the alignment of hard/soft/critical methodologies with technical/practical/emancipatory interest categories, Mingers⁴ made the more specific point that “the theory of KCI was only an epistemological, not an ontological device” (p.412).

The charge of universalism is irrelevant, and might be more appropriately substituted with an assessment of being strongly or weakly socially constituted. To test how robust these KCI categories are, we can examine each interest category in turn, since they successively relate to the three other concerns of Midgley.

(iii) Problem 2: technocentrism

One of the most persuasive criticisms of KCI arises from an ecological-oriented challenge levelled against the supposed human technical interest in mastering control over nature. Whilst this point has been made on several occasions in the CST literature (Midgley, 1994; 1996), the argument has been earlier expressed elsewhere, with a response from Habermas (Thompson & Held, 1982). Henning Ottman (1982) suggests that Habermas precludes the possibility of a non-objectivist relation to nature; that is, a “nature-in-itself” which sets limits to the human interest in technical control. Habermas, it is claimed, does not acknowledge the possibility of a nature which lies beyond the will-to-control. For Midgley, this restrictive perspective on nature precludes possibilities of us establishing more “sustainable” relationships with our non-human environment.

Habermas (1982) addresses the concern at two levels; epistemological and ethical. The latter level of response is more appropriately associated with Midgley’s third problem of anthropocentrism discussed below. At the epistemological level, Habermas simply emphasises that whilst other means of acquiring knowledge of nature might have some validity, any *fruitful* knowledge of the natural world can only be attained by in the first place attempting to *objectify* natural phenomena in an empirical positivist tradition. Habermas reaffirms this point in his later interview (1985): “so far nothing seems to suggest that alternative natural sciences can be developed in a non-objectifying attitude... e.g. alchemistic philosophies of nature” (p. 96). Of course, this attitude is easily interpreted as being *technocentric* when

the debate is restricted to examining the technical interest category outside of its relationship with other interest categories. For me, Habermas is merely reaffirming the actual power of positivist tools in generating knowledge; a controlling power that can just as well be tapped and used for explicit emancipatory purposes as well as being one open for abuse in serving more coercive purposes. Postmodernist sentiment can often make this latter tendency towards abuse preclude the former possibilities of more purposeful endeavour. Critics of Habermas appear to confuse the use of the term “control” between, on the one hand, its relation to fulfilling a technical constitutive interest – as used with KCI as a *technocentric* devise - and on the other, as an ideal in its own right fulfilling aspirations of *technocentrism*. “Control” in this latter sense provides a counter to “emancipation” and is therefore more appropriately discussed in the more wider domain relating to the third constitutive interest category.

Problem 3: anthropocentrism

Part of the problem in debating issues assigned to the technical domain then is in disregarding the inter-relations and relevance of other constitutive interests. The practical constitutive interest is central to the second, ethical, level of response to Ottmann as well as to the third problem identified by Midgley. Habermas (1982) reminds us that, whilst we may share compassion and solidarity with regards to nature, we can never engage nature or living things as *equal partners* in practical discourse. In short, we are necessarily and unavoidably *anthropocentric* in satisfying our second constitutive interest. Ulrich puts a similar case in defending the use of systems categories for environmental planning: “Norms addressing the needs of non-human species (or nature) still need to be articulated and respected by humans. In that sense norms belong not to “the” phenomenal world of nature but to “our” world of society... The question is not whether we are anthropocentric but only how critically we deal with the fact that we are” (Ulrich, 1993:596).

It can of course also be argued that anthropocentrism is a phenomenon of discourse. Indeed, Midgley (1994) elsewhere makes precisely this point in a critique of humanism. The privileging of human boundaries in discourse, Midgley argues, translates environmental issues into a *profane*, as distinct from the more positively oriented *sacred*, status. The argument implies a need for tolerance of other perspectives –Gaia philosophy or ecofeminism, for example - which have a more respectfully essentialist

view of the natural world. There is though a difference between asserting anthropocentric (or humanistic) ideas in a non-critical dogmatic manner - as signalled through the “ism” appendage in ‘anthropocentrism’ – and the less dogmatic sense to which I believe Habermas uses the term. In the former sense, anthropocentrism can legitimately be referred to as a phenomenon of discourse and can be challenged along with other ideological constructs (including, for example, ecocentrism) in the way that Midgely rightly argues in his wider work on boundary critique (1992; 1998). In the latter sense in which Habermas uses the term, there can be little dispute with the self-evident idea that discourse is inherently anthropocentric.

The point that I am making here is similar to that in the previous section. As with the confusion between the technocentric idea and an implied technocentrism, there appears to be a confusion between the Habermasian anthropocentric idea of the implicit value and primacy of human discourse and an alleged anthropocentrism. Whilst stating the case for the primacy of human discourse is in itself an ideological assertion, to avoid being ideologically dogmatic it is of course necessary to retain a critical dimension. Moreover, it is also imperative to have a *transparent* ideological commitment from which critique is generated. In so doing, however, the charge of being ideologically biased is surfaced; the subject of Midgely’s fourth point of challenge relating to the third constitutive interest category.

Problem 4: idealism

Most of the criticism here is directed towards communicative action theory rather than KCI. For example, critical concern over Habermasian ambitions for defining the “*ideal* speech situation” provided the impetus for Werner Ulrich (1983) to develop the more *practical* action-oriented philosophy of *critical systems heuristics*. The associated charge of an implicit bias in using Western/European models of social evolution implies that some universal benchmark of “good” argumentation skills might be provided as ‘best practice’ (Midgely, 1997b).

In relation to the wider theory of knowledge-constitutive interests, the ideological charge is more closely associated with ideals embedded in principles of modernism; as manifest in the general principle of the pursuit of a commonly agreed ideal. With regards to KCI, this ideal is associated directly with the

emancipatory constitutive interest. Habermas stresses the peculiarly derivative status of emancipatory interest: "It guarantees the connection between theoretical knowledge and an 'object domain' of practical life which comes into existence as a result of systematically distorted communication and thinly legitimised repression. The type of action and experience corresponding to this object domain is, therefore, also derivative" (Habermas, 1978:371). In short, the emancipatory ideal seeks release from coercive forces of material deprivation and false consciousness. Notwithstanding Habermas's own arguably misguided pursuit of the "ideal speech situation" – which, as Ulrich points out (1983), suggests the implausible scenario of an absence of false consciousness – a key theme of critical idealism is self-reflexivity. As with accepting the charge of being anthropocentric, Habermas (1985), in being questioned on the possible relevance of his theoretical constructs to societies in the less developed world, makes clear his own bias: "I am aware of the fact that this is a eurocentrically limited view" (p.104). To use Dickens' terms, Habermas appears to accept the *strong* social constructivism associated with the theory of communicative action and social evolution.

The emancipatory ideal might similarly be described as a strong social construct in the postmodernist sense that emancipation can mean different things to different people in different circumstances, and that it is not therefore possible to identify a *consensual* emancipatory ideal (Mingers, 1997). Ulrich brings out a similar point in countering Habermas's consensual ideal (1983): "No effort of argumentative reason can supersede the dependency of practical discourse on an empirical basis that furnishes the material for cogent argumentation and makes certain that such argumentation remains in touch with lived social practice" (p.267). In other words, the critical idealism of Habermas needs to be grounded more explicitly with an explicit realist (material) component. The terms critical "idealism" and critical "realism" here are merely different emphases relating to the same plot; the need to give expression to the dialectic between ideals and the real world.

What is being questioned by Mingers and Ulrich is not the viability of the emancipatory ('ideal') interest category itself but rather the incidence of multiple interpretations of the ideal. For this reason it would appear to me to be imperative for those engaged with knowledge generation to not only be critically reflexive but, in line with the value-laden premises of KCI, to be *politically explicit* in defining the precise emancipatory interests being pursued. In bringing upfront the political dimension of knowledge

generation and intervention, the forces of coercion implied by the emancipatory constitutive interest category are likewise revealed. This reinforces the principle that the emancipatory category is in fact a *weak* social construct; embedded as it is in real-world constituent forces of oppression.

The line of reasoning here runs counter to multimethodology arguments implying that emancipatory 'ideals' and associated methodologies (eg. CSH) should only be applied to coercive situations as implied by TSI. Such ideas imply the existence of ideal non-coercive situations both in the material and ideological realms, which itself, as Ulrich (1993) points out, is a delusion. Ulrich rightly asserts the primacy of an emancipatory interest as a constituent critical component of any interdisciplinary or multimethodological pursuit. The point is echoed by concerns from Oliga (1996) and Mingers (1997) to put upfront the role of the expert intervenor as emancipatory change agents; a point which is in marked contrast to the postmodernist line of privileging "texts" and, as White and Tackett (1994) propose, having experts "practicing invisibility" (p.746).

In summary then, the constitutive interest categories appear to have considerable resilience. The brief review of concerns over KCI suggest that, despite being clearly and openly socially constituted (as with any theoretical construct), there are strong real-world constituent characteristics of the three categories. The social constructivist can revel in the 'technocentric', 'anthropocentric', and 'eurocentric' character of KCI. The critical realist, on the other hand, can appreciate the real-world power of positivist techniques and reflexive communication from a transparent and politically informed critically idealistic position. Such a perspective offers a way forward to realising an emancipatory approach to fostering meaningful interdisciplinarity.

Midgley's final two points of challenge to Flood and Jackson's earlier work relate less to Habermas directly but are aimed more towards the actual workings of TSI: firstly (with Midgley's fifth point), there is the question of how critical awareness of methodological pluralism might be enacted in situations where coercion is not identified; and secondly (with Midgley's sixth point), there is the observation that reports on the application of TSI (barring where 'critical systems heuristics' is employed) appear to take the remit of the organisational boundaries of the client agency for granted without questioning the possible effects of the agenda on wider boundaries. On both points I concur

with Midgley. Moreover, for me, they reinforce the need for a more clearly articulated emancipatory ideal to drive methodological pluralism; a pluralism that might seek to both unveil inevitable incidences of coercion as well as offering better means of redress to those affected by coercion.

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